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The meaning and image of *Otaku* in Japanese society, and its change over time

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to clarify how the term *otaku*, commonly thought of as a Japanese equivalent to the word *nerd*, is defined and regarded in Japanese media and society. This is done through a chronological analysis of newspaper articles from the publications *Asahi Shimbun*, *Shuukan Asahi* and *Aera*, using Laclau and Mouffe's theory on discourse and its analysis as a methodological foundation. The selected period for analysis stretches from 1989, when the term *otaku* was brought into the limelight in the media, to 2012. To supplement this analysis, a contemporary survey is included in the study, carried out in the form of an online questionnaire aimed at Japanese people who self-identify as *otaku*. The survey presents the *otaku*'s own thoughts on the subject at hand: how they define themselves, how they feel society and media regard them, et cetera.

The complete analysis shows that during the past two decades, the term *otaku* has lost much of the negative connotations it carried from the end of the 1980s, though certain stereotypes remain associated with the term. In later years, the term's meaning has become somewhat diluted as more people apply the label to themselves based on a comparatively shallow understanding of the term, removed from its original cultural context.

Keywords: Japan, otaku, pop culture, anime, manga, Akihabara

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1. Introduction

I would be lying if I said that *anime* and related Japanese pop culture was not what sparked my interest in Japan, and later in learning the actual language. With my own hobbies in mind and my lack of interest towards much else, I started identifying myself as an *otaku*, thinking it was merely the Japanese equivalent for “nerd”. So did other westerners, to the point where the term outside of Japan mainly denotes *anime* nerds.

But the more I heard about the word itself, both online and from Japanese friends, the image I had would turn out not to be so clear-cut, as *otaku* carries many nuances and to a degree even stigmas that sets it apart from what we know as “nerd”.

As Japanese sub-cultures spread extensively outside Japan and seeped into the consciousness of Western societies during the past 10+ years or so (especially in my own country, Sweden) with the widespread use of the Internet, the word *otaku* followed suit, as those called such were considered to be the “hardcore” adherents to Japanese sub-culture. Even in Japan itself, there has been a surge of interest from the general populace for the term *otaku*, as the word has been featured more and more prominently in Japanese media in recent years.

Because of this, I believe there is widespread interest in knowing how the *otaku* are regarded, both by themselves and by the society from which they originate. Thus I decided to write this thesis; to clarify this word, its implications and its place in Japanese society.

1.1 Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, lecturer Martin Nordeborg, for his patience, his guidance and his continued input on writing my thesis, as his advice has been invaluable; especially in times when I knew what to write, but not how to write it. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their support and advice during the many months I have spent on researching and writing my study, as this thesis has been the greatest undertaking in my academic career yet.

Finally, I offer my sincere gratitude to all the Japanese people who took their time to participate in my survey. Their opinions and thoughts on the subject at hand helped to paint an even broader picture, which would otherwise have been missing, had I not performed the survey in question.

2. Glossary

Certain words and terms related in one way or another to *otaku* and modern Japan will appear with varying frequency in this thesis. Following is a short glossary aimed to explain these terms for those who may not be familiar with them.

the Akihabara massacre – An incident of mass murder taking place in the Tokyo district Akihabara on June 8th 2008. The perpetrator drove a truck into a crowd, followed by getting out of the truck and using a dagger to stab 12 bystanders at random, ultimately leaving 7 people dead and 10 wounded.

anime (アニメ) – Short for *animeeshon* (アニメーション), from English “*animation*”. Refers to all animation regardless of origin or style domestically, but has become synonymous with Japanese animation internationally.

cosplay (コスプレ) – Short for “*costume play*”, originally and to a certain degree still synonymous with masquerade/dress up, but now more commonly referring to dressing up as certain characters appearing in video games, *anime* and so on.

doujinshi (同人誌) – Comic books made by fans of specific shows and/or franchises rather than by established studios or *manga* authors, depicting characters from these shows and/or franchises in various situations; not uncommonly sexual situations.

idol (アイドル) – Media personalities in their teens and early twenties who regularly appear in mass media for a certain period of time; e.g. as pop group singers (*Morning Musume* et al), models, TV personalities (a.k.a. タレント, *talent*) and more.

lolicon (ロリコン) – Short for “*lolita complex*”, refers to sexual attraction to underage girls, or an individual with such an attraction.

manga (漫画; マンガ) – Comic books (lit. “whimsical pictures”). Specifically associated with Japanese comic books internationally, like *anime*.

the Miyazaki incident – Also known as the *Tokyo/Saitama Serial Kidnapping Murders of Little Girls*. The perpetrator (Tsutomu Miyazaki) kidnapped, murdered and then sexually molested four little girls aged 4-7 years between 1988 and 1989. The investigation following his apprehension revealed extensive collections of *anime*, porn and horror movies, from which a connection to *otaku* culture was drawn and Miyazaki became known as “the *Otaku* Murderer”.

otaku (おたく; オタク) – The very subject of this study. Derived from a humble form of the pronoun “you” when referring to others: お宅, pronounced *otaku*.

3. Background

From a western perspective, Japan could be considered a Mecca for modern popular culture. It is the seat of two major players in today's interactive entertainment industry: Nintendo and Sony, both in terms of video games and other media-related innovations. Although its Korean counterpart recently has taken over some of its international spotlight, "J-pop" has enjoyed a steady growth in popularity in the past decade and beyond. It is also uncommon for younger inhabitants of western countries *not* to associate Japan with comics and animation, as *manga* and *anime* respectively has become a major source of export for the eastern archipelago. Consequently, the image of a so-called *otaku*, the eccentric connoisseur of *anime* and its related merchandise, has been thought of as an ideal among Western fans of Japanese popular culture. Also, parts of Japanese metropolises rife with *otaku*-associated commerce (such as Akihabara in Tokyo and Nipponbashi in Osaka) are popular tourist attractions.

However, Japan as a society is very multifaceted. Despite *manga* and *anime* being major characteristics for Japan internationally, *manga* and *anime* are not necessarily enjoyed by everyone. The popular perception of an *otaku* in Japan is a withdrawn, most often male and socially inept individual (descriptions *otaku* themselves have come to use for ironic self-deprecating purposes), who by their behaviour deviate from the regular and conformist Japanese people. *Otaku* in Japan are more often than not looked down on because of this. Some Japanese patrons of Akihabara, known internationally as an *otaku* Mecca, deny sometimes quite vehemently that they themselves are *otaku*, despite frequenting establishments that mainly cater to *otaku*.¹ And although foreigners with a genuine interest for Japan often are excused by their Japanese peers for their eccentric behaviour regarding their favourite *anime* or *otaku*-esque pastimes, disconcerting accounts of physical attacks by Japanese people against foreigners openly displaying their "nerdiness" are spread on the Internet.

Furthermore, with a wide range of *anime* and related products catering to an adult audience with content simplest described as porn (*ecchi*), there may even be an image of *otaku* being lewd sexual deviants present in the mind of mainstream Japanese society. These works include *doujinshi*, which is essentially a market "by *otaku*, for *otaku*". The way certain

¹ Dela Pena, *Otaku: Images and Identity in Flux* (2006).

characters in these visual arts sometimes are depicted as, by appearance, underage girls (*lolicon*) has become a subject of controversy not only in Japan but in other parts of the world, including Sweden.

The relation between *otaku* and *hikikomori* (“acute social withdrawal”, a phenomenon prevalent in modern Japan) also seem apparent in some cases. For a number of reasons, ranging from solitude-induced desperation to sociopathic behaviour, withdrawn individuals considered as *otaku* have in direr cases lashed out violently against their surroundings, in some cases with very tragic outcomes. Incidents like the Tokyo/Saitama child murders in 1988-1989 (a.k.a. The Tsutomu Miyazaki Incident), and the more recent Akihabara massacre in 2008, both involving perpetrators considered as *otaku*, come to mind.

From a historical perspective, the portrayal of *otaku* in mass media has more often than not been a negative one, going as far as having *otaku* appear as the polar opposite of the salary man ideal, with no ability to contribute to society or take responsibility for themselves.² The sensationalist way major *otaku*-related incidents have been reported in media certainly adds to this. For example, the above-mentioned Tsutomu Miyazaki Incident: the collections of *manga*, *lolicon* and other *otaku*-associated paraphernalia owned by the perpetrator, coupled with the bestial nature of his murders, incited a major moral panic with all sharing the same pastimes as the perpetrator being publicly described as “a whole standing army of murderers”.³

That is not to say that the reception of *otaku* in mainstream media and society has not been in constant flux. The success of the novel *Densha Otoko* (“Train Man”, 2004), which allegedly portrays the real account of an *otaku* man with no prior experience with women trying to date a “normal” woman with the help of other *otaku* via online message boards, shows that the general image of *otaku* could be and was improved, as their unorthodox and awkward masculinity was well-received. Ironically however, certain other *otaku* would criticize *Densha Otoko* for portraying *otaku* as immature individuals who have to “grow up” from their lifestyle.⁴

² Slater & Galbraith, *Re-Narrating Social Class and Masculinity in Neoliberal Japan – An examination of the media coverage of the 'Akihabara Incident' of 2008* (2011).

³ Kinsella, *Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement* (1998).

⁴ Slater & Galbraith (2011).

That said, mass media would jump on the “weird *otaku*”-bandwagon with the 2008 Akihabara massacre, where a “lonely, failed” man left 7 innocent bystanders dead and 10 injured, after a truck crash and stabbing spree in the eponymous Tokyo district. Mass media were quick to associate the perpetrator, Tomohiro Katou, with *otaku* culture as news broadcasts focused on his love for *anime* coupled with dramatic music to paint a frightening picture.⁵ In a society considered safe from violent crime compared to most other western countries, the idea of someone capable of such heinous acts is frightening, which aids further suspicion towards *otaku* at large.

3.1 Problem and Aim

The multifaceted Japanese society makes it hard to pin down exactly what position *otaku* hold in it today. The same can be said for *otaku* in terms of definition, as the most prevalent definitions are mainly stereotypes. There’s seemingly so much more to being an *otaku* than to just be a “nerd”, as “nerd” or “geek” may be the closest word to *otaku* in the English language, but even then woefully lacking in description.⁶

The aim of this study is how an *otaku* and the *otaku* culture are defined, and how they truly are viewed by Japanese mainstream society. The results of the study will answer the following research questions:

- What is the definition of an *otaku*, according to mainstream society (i.e. mainstream media; in this study’s case the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper)?
- By contrast, how do *otaku* define themselves?
- Is the general image of *otaku* culture held by society at large a positive or a negative one?
- How has this image changed over time?

3.2 Discourse theory

As it happens, our perception of reality is created by our language. The language used regarding certain matters (such as the world of medicine, and *otaku* culture as highlighted in

⁵ Slater & Galbraith (2011).

⁶ Ibid.

this study) form our worldview and how we view the reality around us through representations of it, rather than being exact reflections of said reality. While a physical reality does exist on its own no matter what meaning is applied to it, it is through our perception through language, the discourse surrounding it, that it is given an actual meaning in our minds.

While said discourses decide our perspective on social phenomena, the meaning and definition of said phenomena is in continuous change, thus never constant, which leads to an ongoing social struggle between conflicting definitions of society, identity (e.g. the *otaku* identity), according to the discourse theory by Laclau and Mouffe.

The aim of a discourse analysis is to study this struggle for a fixed definition; a struggle of which the outcome will lead to social consequences. Laclau and Mouffe further define the actual word *discourse* as the structured totality of meanings derived from a certain domain, e.g. the world of medicine, in which all signs (such as *body* in medicine) occurring in a specific discourse are *moments*. Moments in turn have their meanings fixated by their relation, or rather differences, to other moments, making the discourse a self-referring system.

Certain signs in a domain, like *democracy* in political discourse, uphold a privileged position called *nodal points*, around which the discourse is formed. It is through these nodal points that other signs in a discourse have their own meaning fixed. As a consequence, certain possible meanings of a sign are excluded, as only a partial fixation of meaning can be done. Said excluded meanings are what make out the so-called *discursive field*.

Identifying nodal points involves examining how the same signs are defined in alternative ways by other discourses. Furthermore, the discourse theory analyses how the structure a discourse forms is changed through examining how articulations constantly reproduce, question or reshape the discourses (again an example in terms of medicine, the acceptance of acupuncture would reshape the medical discourse).⁷

To fulfil the aims of this study, I will be applying a discourse analysis to analyse the chronological struggle between definitions regarding the word *otaku* in Japan.

⁷ Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002), pp. 24-29

3.3 Method

This study has been carried out as a discourse analysis; reviewing and discussing how the definition of *otaku* is born out of the text and tone of editorials, newspaper articles and so on, and how this definition has changed over time and in light of certain occurrences and incidents.

For the mainstream perspective, I chose to look up, analyse and compare newspaper articles regarding *otaku* culture and *otaku*-related topics available in the daily newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*'s vast online database.⁸ Available in the database are articles from *Asahi Shimbun* itself, one of Japan's five national daily newspapers with a national circulation of 7.6 million as of December 2012⁹, *Shuukan Asahi* (*Weekly Asahi*) and *Aera*; the latter two being weekly magazines published by a subsidiary of *Asahi Shimbun*. While *Asahi Shimbun* reports the daily news as any other newspaper would, the weekly publications contain interviews, portraits, longer articles covering certain events from the week that has passed and so on. It is possible to exclude certain publications when searching for articles in the database, but I chose to include all three publications in my research.

I've chosen to focus on articles available in the database from three specific periods of time: the end of the 1980s through the 1990s, the first decade of 2000 and finally the 2010s up to and including 2012. This is because until the wake of the Miyazaki Incident of 1989, the word with its contemporary meaning was unknown to the general public.

The keyword, *otaku*, is written in three particular ways; one in *hiragana* (おたく), and two in *katakana* (オタク; ヲタク). As ヲタク is a relatively new way of spelling (only 9 *Asahi* articles from 2000 and beyond containing the word), and オタク is more commonly used in media and online to denote the "nerds", I used オタク as my main keyword in my search and analysis of relevant articles.

That said, the closer to current times I got, the amount of articles containing the keyword became increasingly overwhelming (for example, the first half of the '90s produced 84 hits,

⁸ *Asahi Shinbun Kikuzo II Visual*, available via <http://www.asiaportal.info/> as of 2013-05-15.

⁹ *Japan Audit Bureau of Circulation*; numbers available at <http://adv.yomiuri.co.jp/yomiuri/busu/busu01a.html> as of 2013-05-15.

while the second half produced an astonishing 278 articles; the entire database producing 1769 articles as of April 11th 2013). To ease the workload, I opted to incorporate a second keyword from the period of 1995 and beyond that had been frequently associated with *otaku* in earlier articles, アニメ (*anime*), yielding a far more manageable amount of material (459 articles as of April 11th 2013). Of course, this form of limitation carries the inherent risk of filtering out articles that mention or discuss the term *otaku* without associating it with *anime*, and thus would not become part of my analysis.

To compensate for the above-mentioned risk of the results of my research being affected by my selection of additional keywords, I made additional selections of articles with only オタク as a keyword, limited to certain periods of time; notably 2004-2005 (the period in which *Densha Otoko* became a big hit in Japan), 2008 (the year of the Akihabara massacre), and 2010-2012. Replacing *anime* with other keywords unrelated to certain hobbies, such as 意味 (*meaning*), イメージ (*image*) and 偏見 (*prejudice*)¹⁰, and making full-period selections of articles served to further broaden the research without becoming overwhelming. Worthy of note is the very fact that the closer to current times you come from the late '80s, the more frequently *otaku* appear in the media (or specifically, in Asahi); Asahi Shimbun had 102 articles containing the word *otaku* in 2012 alone.

As thoroughly analysing each and every article remains an overwhelming task, even after making the above selections, I made a preliminary screening of each article before analysing it. This was done by skimming through the articles to find the given keywords (mainly オタク) and see in what context the word is brought up in. If the context explained the word or in any other way was relevant to my study, I made a note to further analyse the article later. If the article was deemed irrelevant to my study, I chose to discard it.

For the *otaku* perspective, I constructed a questionnaire in Japanese and had it distributed digitally to Japanese contacts, their friends and acquaintances who self-identify as *otaku*. This questionnaire allowed them to anonymously submit their thoughts and opinions regarding the subject at hand for analysis for the benefit of this study, including but not limited to what their idea of an *otaku* is and how open they are with being an *otaku* in everyday society.

¹⁰ Pronounced *imi*, *imeeji* and *henken* respectively.

In light of this, I chose to write this thesis in English, despite it not being my first language. This is done so that the above-mentioned participants of the Japanese questionnaire may be able to scrutinize the study and its results, to which they have contributed with their participation.

4. Previous studies

Previous studies in the field of *otaku* as a definition and specifically their change of image have been made. For example, in *Otaku: Images and Identity in Flux*, the author argues that not only the image but also the personal identity of an *otaku* is in constant change, and the label of *otaku*, once unfavourable and considered weird or even dangerous, is becoming “cool”.¹¹ This conclusion may however be outdated as the Akihabara massacre and its effect on mainstream opinion would occur only two years after this study was published.

In 2007, Satoru Kikuchi of Shinshu University sent out a questionnaire for a study, the aim of which was identical to my own; to determine the change of the image of *otaku* held by Japanese society. Unlike my own questionnaire however, his was not specifically aimed for those who considered themselves to be *otaku*, but rather Japanese undergraduate students in general (to a total of 368 respondents). The actual questions covered, among other things, what kind of people the respondents thought *otaku* are, what genres they associate *otaku* with and so on in terms of stereotypes.

Dividing their answers on what kind of people *otaku* are into “positive”, “negative” and “other” definitions, the results showed that the ratio of respondents with a positive image of *otaku* had doubled (from 17% in '98 to 35% in '07), while those with a negative image had gone down by about a third (62% in '98 and 42% in '07).¹² As for what the definitions were, the study presents the most prevalent ones, including but not limited to:

ネガティブ 155人 (*Negative, 155 people*)

あることに病的に取り組んでいる人

People striving abnormally for a certain thing

ゲーム・アニメ・マンガなどの二次元に尋常じゃないほどのめり込んでいる

[People who] are to an unusual degree completely absorbed in games, anime, manga and other two-dimensional [worlds]

身だしなみに気を使わない人が多い。一般常識に欠ける

Many [of them] don't attend to their personal appearances. Generally lacking in common sense

¹¹ Dela Pena (2006).

¹² Kikuchi, *The Transformation and the diffusion of "Otaku" Stereotypes and the Establishment of "Akihabara" as a Place-brand* (2008).

ポジティブ 127人 (*Positive, 127 people*)

専門的なことをよく知っている

Well-knowing in something exclusive

ある分野でプロではないが、プロのように行動したり、知識を持っている

Not a professional in a certain field, but behave like one and possess knowledge [in said field]

探求心がすごい

[Their] spirit of pursuit [of something] is amazing

その他 86人 (*Other, 86 people*)

秋葉原にいる

[People] in Akihabara

アニメが好き

[People who] like anime

何かのマニア

Enthusiasts of something

However, like Dela Pena's study this is not entirely up-to-date either. While the study was finalized in December 2008, the actual survey was performed in 2007, thus not taking the Akihabara massacre in June 2008 into account or its effects on the *otaku* image.

My study is in a similar vein to these and other previous studies, but aside from keeping the topic up to date, I was unable to find any earlier studies where the opinions regarding mainstream society's image of *otaku* from *otaku* themselves were presented; an aspect which I intend to cover with this study.

5. *Otaku* defined in Japanese media (*Asahi Shimbun*, *Weekly Asahi*, *Aera*) – A chronological analysis

5.1 Late 1980s through the '90s – Tsutomu Miyazaki puts *Otaku* in the limelight (and sets the tone of the debate)

Otaku, as we know the word today, appeared very rarely in Japanese media up until the latter half of 1989. In *Asahi Shimbun*'s case, the word would usually come up in its original context instead of its contemporary meaning.¹³ This were to change with the arrest of the perpetrator of the '88-'89 Tokyo/Saitama child murders, one *Tsutomu Miyazaki*. In the wake of his arrest, his home became target for public scrutiny, as his “strangeness” (「異常」さ) was unheard-of in regular Japanese society.¹⁴

It was because of this incident that the word *otaku* with its current meaning rose to the surface in Japanese mass media. The *otaku* were described as:

アニメ、コミック、ゲームなどの熱狂的なファンで、その世界を共有しない他者とは、コミュニケーションを持ちたがらない、若者群を指す。¹⁵

[The word specifies] young, wildly enthusiastic fans of cartoons, comics, video games etc. who do not wish to communicate with others who don't share their interests.

Furthermore, a later article on the term おたく族 (*otaku-zoku*, lit. *otaku tribe*) adds:

ビデオや、漫画雑誌、パソコンゲーム、アイドルタレントなどに趣味があり、好きな分野では仲間と交流するが、趣味についての情報を交換するだけで、深い友人の付き合いはしないというのが、一般的な理解だ。¹⁶

The general understanding of what they are is that they are [people] with a liking for video, comic books, computer games, idols etc. who interact with like-minded comrades, but only in exchange of news within their hobbies and do not socialize with deep friends.

In 1991, an article regarding the emergence of news magazines aimed toward children, and the subsequent erosion of differences between children and adults, had the following to say at

¹³ See glossary.

¹⁴ *Asahi Shimbun*, 24 August 1989.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6 January 1990.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 10 March 1990.

the end:

こどもは生まれながらに情報化社会で鍛えられ、一方、おとなは、生産性のないオタクになり、[...]こどもにとどまりたい願望を隠さない。¹⁷

While children are forged by the information society, on the other hand, adults become unproductive otaku [...] who do not hide their desire to remain children. [emphasis added]

Otaku does not appear anywhere else in the article but is seemingly thrown in at the last minute, written in such negative fashion that it portrays *otaku* as *unproductive man-children*.¹⁸

In 1992, an article detailing the “code words” and fashionable language used by middle- and high-school students at the time was published in Asahi’s morning edition. At a girls’ high-school in Hyogo prefecture, the elaborate buzzword “エネチ” (*enechi*), derived from the initials of the English phrase “Not Human”, was used among the students. As for its meaning:

巷でいわれるオタクの意味で、見た目が気持ち悪くて、見るに忍びない人を指すという。¹⁹

What’s called otaku in public, and indicate people with unpleasant appearances that are so miserable it hurts to look at them.

A very harsh and negative association for *otaku* carried by high school students at the time, as the supposedly “normal” youth brand them as “not human”.

Based on all these and other articles, one can assume that being labelled as, or associated with, *otaku* was a major faux pas in Japanese society at the time. This assumption is quite justified in a column appearing in 1996, written by one Yumiko Yamaguchi, an event planner. Her very first words in the column are “I love animation”, which she elaborates on further with her infatuation for *anime*, especially the works of director Mamoru Oshii (*Patlabor*, *Ghost in the Shell*). The whole article explains her enthusiasm for Oshii’s specific works and animation in general, including how she planned events coinciding with the release of the *anime* movie *Ghost in the Shell*. But at the very end she adds:

¹⁷ Asahi Shimbun, 11 August 1991.

¹⁸ “Man-child” is a slang term used to describe a physical adult with an immature personality.

¹⁹ Asahi Shimbun, 2 November 1992.

アー、でも、〈オタク〉じゃないです。念のため。²⁰

Oh, but, I'm not an "otaku". Just to make sure.

Although the author shares the interests and perhaps even the zeal of an *anime otaku*, she felt it to be necessary to point out that she is not one of them, very likely because the word still carries negative connotations.

An article in 1997 reporting of a voice actor event held in Shibuya describes the type of attendants at the event as:

[...]暗い雰囲気、汗くさい青年たちで、いわゆるアニメオタクと呼ばれる人たちだ。²¹

[...] young men projecting a gloomy atmosphere and smell of sweat; the so-called anime otaku.

The exterior image of *otaku* remains unchanged, though *otaku* themselves are probably not without blame for this.

5.2 The first decade of the new millennium (2000) – Akihabara, *Densha Otoko* and the upheaval of the *otaku* image

The association of *otaku* to heinous crimes is carried over into the new millennium, with a seemingly off-handed example in May 2001; in the wake of the arrest of a suspect for a knife murder of a junior college student in Asakusa, author Ryuuzou Saki draws a connection between the suspect's "skewed values" (ゆがんだ価値観; an assumption made by him having worn a weird red panda hat while perpetrating the crime) and the term *otaku*:

アニメの世界にのめり込み、自分の部屋に膨大なビデオを抱えた連続少女誘拐殺人事件の宮崎勤被告の場合、「オタク」という言葉がよく使われたが、それと共通項のようなものも感じる。²²

In the case of the suspect of the little girl serial killings Tsutomu Miyazaki, who was completely absorbed in the world of animation and kept an enormous [collection] of videos in his room, the word "otaku" was frequently used; I feel however that there are common traits as well [between that word and this incident].

²⁰ Asahi Shimbun, 24 February 1996.

²¹ Ibid, 22 March 1997.

²² Ibid, 11 May 2001.

This was all under the sub header *A sense of common traits with “otaku”* (「オタク」と共通項感じる), no less.

A parallel is drawn between *otaku* and skewed values, using the Miyazaki incident as a definition of character, although there is no other piece of evidence other than the suspect's red panda-hat presented in the article to back this claim.

Later on, the term *otaku* was brought up in negative limelight again with the arrest of one of two suspects of the kidnapping of a grade school girl in Kuroiso. Asahi articles about the case quote psychiatrist Tamaki Saitou on the matter:

[...]容疑者はコミックマーケットに参加するなど、ただのアニメファンというより、いわゆるコアな「オタク」であることは間違いないだろう。²³

[...] *The suspect attended Comic Market among other things, [so] rather than an ordinary anime-fan, there should be no doubt that he is what you would call a core “otaku”.*

最近の事件では、仮想の世界と現実の世界が混乱して事件を起こしてしまったといわれることもあるが、彼の場合は最初に問題があったのだろう。²⁴

In this recent case, it has also been said that [he] confused the real world with an imaginary one and ended up perpetrating this incident, but in his case this must have been a problem from the start.

The psychiatrist (and Asahi by extension) first use the suspect to define *otaku* as something more than just an “ordinary anime-fan”, distinguishing *otaku* from those who just like *anime*, and then use the suspect and his crime to draw a connection between being unable to tell fantasy apart from reality and being *otaku*. A following article published on the same day describes the suspect as:

ゲームやアニメ、インターネットなどに熱中した「オタク系」の容疑者²⁵

An “otaku-style” suspect, who was zealous over games, anime, internet and the like

That said, the above-mentioned psychiatrist would appear a lot more sympathetic towards

²³ Asahi Shimbun, 23 August 2001.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

otaku, as he's later quoted in an article regarding how the so-called "*otaku* industry" is distancing itself from the suspect and his crime:

オタクにとっては二次元の存在は現実の代替物ではなく、それこそが唯一無二の対象。だから、オタクが藤田容疑者のように『二次元の存在に飽きたらず現実の少女に走る』ことは原理的にあり得ない。²⁶

For otaku, two-dimensional existence is not a substitute for reality, but the sole object of worship. Thus, the idea of otaku "not having enough of two-dimensional existence and running after real girls" like suspect Fushida did is impossible by principle.

Although one can still easily get the idea that *otaku* are strange people who obsess over cartoons and video games (i.e. two-dimensional things), the article projects the notion that in reality they are harmless by default.

Anyone who is at least slightly familiar with *otaku* culture have probably come across the word 萌え (*moe*, lit. *budding*) in *otaku* environments, such as message boards on the internet and the like; seemingly used with much passion. Asahi sought to explain its meaning in this context in 2001, in an article regarding words and phrases appearing in the digital world:

「萌える」は広辞苑には「芽が出る。芽ぐむ」とあるが、インターネットでは、「情熱・感情が盛んに起こる」の意味の「燃える」の転用のような使い方が目につく。²⁷

“萌える” [*is defined as*] “to bud; to sprout” in the *Kojien* dictionary, but on the internet, one notices its way of use is like a diversion from the meaning of the word “燃える” [*same pronunciation, lit. to get fired up*]; “passion/emotion vigorously occurring”. [emphasis added]

多いのは「××萌え」という表現。「××」には、人気アイドルやアニメキャラクターの女性の名が入る。20年ほど前に若者向け雑誌で使われたのが起源とされるが、広まったのはパソコン通信が盛んになってからだ。²⁸

The [use of the] expression “×× moe” is numerous. The name of a famous female idol or anime character is in the place of ××. The word’s origin is considered to be its use in youth magazines about 20 years ago, but it was spread after computer communication became popular.

Akihabara was previously (and to a certain degree still is) a “city of electronics”, but a few

²⁶ Aera, 3 September 2001.

²⁷ Asahi Shimbun, 24 September 2001.

²⁸ Ibid.

years into the new millennium, Asahi reported how it had changed to the Mecca of *otaku* culture that we know of today in less than a decade, beginning at the end of the 1990s. Starting with now world-famous plastic model maker Kaiyodo moving their company store to Akihabara in '97, other back alley-shops from places like Shibuya and Kichijouji followed suit in great numbers.²⁹ By 2003, stores specializing in electronics were no longer the leading business in Akihabara.

秋葉原駅前のラジオ会館。この5年間で、美少女キャラクター相手の恋愛ゲームや漫画同人誌など、オタク趣味商品を扱う店が売り場の半分を占めるようになった。³⁰

The Radio Hall in front of Akihabara train station. In these [last] five years, half the [building] is made out of stores dealing with otaku-merchandise such as dating simulation games, manga, doujinshi and so on.

通りには、アニメに出る登場人物の衣装を販売するコスプレ店、それを着ているコスプレ喫茶もある。³¹

On the streets, there are also cosplay stores selling costumes of characters appearing in anime, and cosplay cafés [with people] wearing said costumes.

Assumingly because of Akihabara turning into holy ground for *otaku* culture (オタクの聖地, *otaku no seichi*), a new word started to appear in media as well as mainstream Japanese society: アキバ系 (*akiba-kei*, lit. *Akiba-style*). Its meaning is synonymous with *otaku*.³² Cementing the relation between the district and *otaku* subculture.

The impact of *otakus'* hobbies in the economy would be recognized at this time as well. As of August 2004, the Nomura Institute for General Research estimated that the “*otaku*” who support the four fields of *anime*, comics, games and idols number about 2.8 million people, and their yearly market scale numbers in 260 billion yen (approx. 2.04 billion Euro as of 2013-04-26), from a total of 2.3 trillion yen, making out over 11% of total numbers.

²⁹ Asahi Shimbun, 24 September 2003.

³⁰ Ibid, 23 September 2003.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 15 May 2004.

野村総研は、オタクと呼ばれる人たちの消費行動は企業などにとっても「無視できない存在に成長した」と評価。「もはやオタクはニッチ市場ではない」と報告書で結論づけた。³³

The Nomura Institute assess that the consumptionist behaviour of those that are called otaku has “grown to [levels] that cannot be ignored” by businesses and the like. They summarized in their written report that “Otaku is no longer a niche market”.

In terms of definition, the article presenting the report adds:

報告書は、オタクを「特定の趣味分野に生活の時間や所得の多くをかける人たち」と定義。³⁴

The report defines otaku as “people who spend a lot of time and money on specific fields of hobbies”.

This is in keeping with the popular idea that *otaku* are obsessive, as they spend a considerable amount of money despite their small numbers.

The image of *otaku* held by mainstream Japanese society would receive perhaps its greatest upheaval in the latter half of 2004 however, with the publishing of the novel *Densha Otoko* (電車男, *Train Man*). The book is based on actual threads from the Japanese online bulletin board *2channel*, starting with a “young *anime otaku*” (the titular Train Man), whose time without a girlfriend was equal to his age (彼女いない歴＝年齢), detailing the events of one particular day. On the train home, he intervened when an inebriated man harassed a couple of female passengers. Two days later, he received a package from one of the women he had aided, containing a thank you-letter and an expensive Hermès-brand teacup. Surprised by the gift, and convinced that its value meant more than simply “thank you”, he turned to the other users on *2channel* for advice on what to do.³⁵

The story that followed became a huge sensation spreading throughout the media, the original bulletin threads first being published as the above-mentioned novel, and later being adapted into one successful movie, one equally successful drama TV-series and four different *manga* adaptations. An editor at the publisher behind the original novel had the following to say:

³³ Asahi Shimbun, 24 August 2004.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Aera, 2 August 2004.

今まで、オタクの男の子は全員、現実の女性に興味がなくて、自己中心的な恋愛観の持ち主だと、誤解していました。こんなにピュアで、女性に対して真剣な思いを持つ人もいるんですね

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Up until now, my idea of otaku boys all being uninterested in real-life women and having a self-centred philosophy of love was a complete misunderstanding. There are indeed people with such pure and earnest feelings towards women

Author Shun'ichi Karazawa adds that the negative impression of *otaku* has faded, due to the great hit that was *Densha Otoko*.³⁷

The suspicion toward *otaku* brought by the Miyazaki case nearly two decades ago lives on, however. In a very much similar case of child abduction and subsequent murder in Tochigi prefecture, an eyewitness had seen a particularly suspicious person in the area the day before the victim (a first-grade schoolgirl) disappeared. This is how the man was described:

不潔そうなもじゃもじゃの茶色っぽい長髪に無精ヒゲ、眼鏡をかけたアキバ系のオタクみたいな40代くらいの男³⁸

A Akiba-style otaku-like man in his 40s, with brown filthy unkempt long hair, stubble and glasses

Ultimately, the prevailing image of *otaku* would come into question in the aftermath of the Akihabara massacre in June 8th 2008, where 7 people lay dead after one man, Tomohiro Katou, went on a rampage in the *otaku* Mecca. In a somewhat surprising development, while other sources state that the media was quick to draw a connection between the perpetrator and *otaku* culture³⁹, Asahi was fairly quiet about that particular detail, compared to the extensive coverage that the Miyazaki child murders and its connection to *otaku* received in 1989.

Nevertheless, Asahi did publish one letter to the editor, in which the author (a Kagoshima high-school student) showed his dismay over how the media reported the cause of the massacre:

³⁶ Aera, 2 August 2004.

³⁷ Asahi Shimbun, 21 May 2007.

³⁸ Shuukan Asahi, 16 December 2005.

³⁹ Slater & Galbraith (2011).

最近起こった秋葉原事件でもそうだが、世間はすぐにゲームやアニメといった「オタク文化」の影響、と結論づけようとする。そのような安易な関連づけは避けるべきである。⁴⁰

This goes for the Akihabara incident that recently occurred; the society would instantly conclude that [it was] influenced by the “otaku culture” of games, anime and such. We should avoid [making] such simple associations.

オタクはキモい、異常だ、といった社会全体の偏見こそが彼らの「心の闇」を生み出しているのではないだろうか。⁴¹

Is it not so that the whole society’s prejudice of otaku being disgusting, abnormal and so on brings out their “hearts’ darkness”?

The nature of Tomohiro’s crime and the above author’s grievances notwithstanding, judging by the lack of connections drawn between the massacre and *otaku* culture in Asahi’s later articles, it would seem that the improved attitudes toward *otaku* in the media were here to stay.

5.3 2010 and beyond – The *otaku* image today

In September 2010, Asahi published an article presenting the results of a survey made by students of Kwansei Gakuin University. The goal of the survey was to determine if the impression of many young men being so-called “草食男子” (*soushoku danshi*, lit. *herbivore boys*) held true; a term used for young men who are not competitive in terms of success and affection compared to traditional male stereotypes. While the results of said survey is not relevant for this study⁴², the way the students performing the survey classified the different groups of respondents is telling of how *otaku* were viewed, with one of them described as:

協調性がなく、恋愛や外見に関心の低い「オタク系」⁴³

“Otaku-style”, with no spirit of cooperation and low interest in love and outward appearance

Compared with the other groups of respondents, the *otaku* were given the short stick in all aspects of labelling, as the other groups (“lone wolves”, the popular and even the “herbivore

⁴⁰ Asahi Shimbun, 29 June 2008.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² It turns out that, based on the definition used by the survey, the “herbivore boys” made out only about one tenth of total participants, disproving the notion that they were many.

⁴³ Asahi Shimbun, 1 September 2010.

boys”) were defined with at least one positive or assertive characteristic.

One Asahi article on idols, another subject of *otaku* enthusiasm, is helpful enough to offer a short glossary at the end, giving us a clear-cut description of the word *otaku* that supposedly prevails today and surprisingly shines a small positive light on the term, compared to the previously quoted article:

[...]アニメやアイドル、鉄道などの趣味に没頭する人の総称。かつての社交性に乏しい、暗いというイメージから、最近では知識の豊富なマニアという肯定的な意味でも使われる。⁴⁴

[Otaku is] A general term for people who immerse themselves in hobbies such as anime, idols, trains etc. Once carrying an image of gloom and lacking in sociability, the word has recently been used in the positive context of enthusiasts with abundant knowledge as well.

While the media over time repeatedly reported the more broad definition of *otaku* (one of the most prominent words used being 熱心 (*nesshin*, meaning *zeal*; *enthusiasm*), the stereotypes in terms of associated genres persist. Asahi introduced the event “We love Akiba!” (アキバ大好き!) to its readers the following way:

アニメグッズ、メイドカフェからゲーム、鉄道模型に至るまで、さまざまな「オタク」の店が一堂に会して出店するイベントが8、9日、東京・秋葉原で開かれる。⁴⁵

On the 8th and 9th [of this month] in Akihabara, Tokyo, an event gathering and setting up various “otaku” shops, [ranging] from anime-goods and maid cafés to games and model railroading, into one building will be opened.

Even on an international level, certain genres not necessarily related to Japanese sub-culture are labelled as *otaku*-related, as Asahi’s article of the American convention Comic-Con shows:

毎年7月にサンディエゴで開かれるコミコンは漫画ファンやS Fファンが集まる全米最大のオタク祭りである。⁴⁶

Comic-Con, held every July in San Diego, is the largest otaku festival in all of America, to which comic book-fans, science fiction-fans and the like gather.

⁴⁴ Asahi Shimbun, 3 December 2011.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 4 January 2012.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6 January 2012.

The super-consumerist image of *otaku* lives on as well, as Asahi in an article about the second-hand market for goods related to *anime* and the like quotes second-hand store proprietor Hiroshige Yamamoto, as he defines what a “true *otaku*” is:

「真のオタクは、自分で楽しむ観賞用、未開封のまま秘蔵する保存用、友人に良さを伝える『布教』用と、同じ商品を何個も持っている」と山本さん。⁴⁷

Mr. Yamamoto adds: “A true otaku owns many copies of the same article; one for one’s own enjoyment, one for preservation in its unopened condition, and one for ‘propagation’ to convey its good quality to friends.”

The article continues that this combined with the inevitable issue of private storage, that there’s a lack of storage space for the average person, explains why over 70% of their second-hand products are unopened goods in mint condition.

Earlier in this text, the *Densha Otoko*-phenomenon and how it served to redefine *otaku* was brought up. Becoming more than withdrawn introverts in the eyes of society, and women especially, *otaku* began to be viewed as potential spouses. Despite the fluctuations the term has experienced since then, the notion of *otaku* being “date-able” persisted, as Asahi reports of an increasing trend of *otaku*-oriented dating services and activities, up to and including online dating services catering specifically to *otaku*.⁴⁸ Commenting on *otaku* preferences, the author adds:

オタクといえばフィギュアやアニメの2次元キャラにしか興味を持たないのでは？と思われがちだが、生身の女性にもちゃんと興味はあるらしい。⁴⁹

Speaking of otaku, they tend to be regarded as “having no interest in anything else than the two-dimensional characters of [collectible] figures, anime and such”, but it does seem that they are perfectly interested in actual women of flesh and blood as well.

The image of *otaku* participating in what could be considered juvenile hobbies (collectible figures considered to be toys, for example), as well as of their infatuation for fictional characters outweighing their interest for real partners remains in the consciousness of Japanese society. But the emergence of these kinds of social activities catering to *otaku* show that compared with the circumstances only two decades ago, much of the stigma associated

⁴⁷ Asahi Shimbun, 9 May 2012.

⁴⁸ Shukan Asahi, 15 June 2012.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

with the word has weakened considerably in the eyes of Japanese society. A society which in turn has become more open to *otaku*; that is, if one were to judge entirely by Asahi's reports alone.

6. *Otaku* in the eyes of *Otaku* – A contemporary survey

6.1 The questionnaire

As mentioned in the method section of this text, a questionnaire was drafted for Japanese people who self-identify as *otaku*, to see how *otaku* define themselves compared to the prevalent impression they have in society and the media. Once said questionnaire was completed, it was made available online and distributed with the help of Japanese contacts and social networking services.⁵⁰ Although the questionnaire was mainly meant for those who self-identify as *otaku*, it was structured in such way that those who do not could still contribute with their opinion. Participation was completely anonymous and no answers could in any way be tracked back to their respective respondents.

Following are the questions that were asked in the survey (gender and other rudimentary questions excluded):

「オタク」という単語を聞いて、どんなイメージを持ちますか？

What do you think when you hear the word “otaku”?

「オタク」は日本社会で、どう思われていると思いますか。また、そのイメージは近年変わってきていると思いますか。

In your opinion, how are “otaku” regarded in Japanese society? Has this image of “otaku” changed in recent years?

あなたは自分のことを「オタク」だと思いませんか。はいと答えた方は、どうしてそう思いますか。

Do you think of yourself as an “otaku”? If yes, why do you think so?

As this study is a discourse analysis focusing on how *otaku* is defined, the analysis will focus on the answers given to these first three questions. A small number of additional questions were added to offer the respondents the possibility to give further insight into what being an *otaku* is today, granted they said “Yes” on question 3:

⁵⁰ Such as *Twitter* through retweeting and the author’s personal *Mixi*-account.

あなたはどのくらい「自分がオタクである」ということを周りに話していますか。

How open are you with your “otaku-ness” with your surroundings?

(While this question had pre-written answers, they were both multiple-choice and with the option to write your own answer)

「オタク」として、差別されていることを感じていますか。それはどんな時ですか。体験談なども書きください。

Do you feel discriminated as an “otaku”? If yes, at what times? Please write about your personal experiences if applicable.

コメント、ご感想などありましたら、ご自由にお書きください。

Please feel free to share any comments, thoughts etc. that you might have.

6.2 Summary of respondents

On March 19th 2013, the questionnaire was brought online.⁵¹ On April 1st, the last respondent submitted their answers, bringing the total number of respondents to 33. 29 consider themselves in one way or another to be *otaku*.

The ages of the respondents varies between 14 and 38 years, with 3 respondents refraining from giving their age. Both the average and median ages are 25 years.

The division of gender among the respondents is 16 men and 17 women; however, excluding those who did not identify themselves as *otaku* the actual numbers are 15 men and 14 women. Still, the male *otaku*'s only slight majority alone shows how *otaku* over time have changed from an originally male-dominant phenomenon, the small number of respondents notwithstanding.

The geographic diversity of the respondents shows a considerably large portion of the respondents living in Hokkaido (14, or about 43% of total respondents). The rest of the respondents are spread somewhat evenly westward along the country from Tokyo, albeit with a concentration in the Kansai, Chubu and Shikoku regions.

⁵¹ The questionnaire in its entirety is still available at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gFpEkJKGPX-hZYynPtmvN7U3F3aZQEaKE97vrTvNZNg/viewform?pli=1> as of 2013-05-15.

6.3 What *otaku* think of *otaku*

The idea of what defines an *otaku* is well-varied among the respondents, ranging from defining genres to their outward appearance. A quite recurrent theme, however, is their fixation to a certain field. Examples include:

特定の分野に対し専門的な知識ではない方向で詳しい

Being well-informed in a non-professional way regarding a specific field

特定の分野の知識、または一般の方があまり興味を示していない事象に異常なまでに詳しい人
というイメージです

An image of people with knowledge in a specific field, and also abnormally well-acquainted with matters that regular people seldom show interest for

一つの物事（自分が好きな事）に対しての知識が秀でている人

People who excel at knowledge regarding one thing (a thing they like themselves)

特定の分野においてのみ知識が深い

Deep knowledge in only a specific field

何かに夢中になってる人

People who become engrossed in something

As for *otaku*-defining genres, *anime* takes precedence:

アニメ・ゲームが好きな人

People who like anime and games

ゲームが好き アニメが好き 二次元が好き

Likes games; Likes anime; Likes two-dimensional [characters]

漫画やアニメ、ゲームなどが好きで、それらに没頭している人

People who like manga, anime, games etc, and immerse themselves in such

サブカルチャー アニメ、漫画 VOCALOID

Subculture; Anime, manga; Vocaloid

本来の意味でのオタクという言葉の意味より「アニメオタク」のイメージが先行しています
Rather than the original meaning of the word otaku, the “anime otaku”-image is preceding

Of course, *otaku* are no strangers to self-depreciation when it comes to negative definitions:

陰鬱なイメージ
A melancholic image

マイナス
Negative [lit. minus]

イメージは、暗い性格のダサイ若者
[My] image [of otaku] is of young, unfashionable people with gloomy personalities

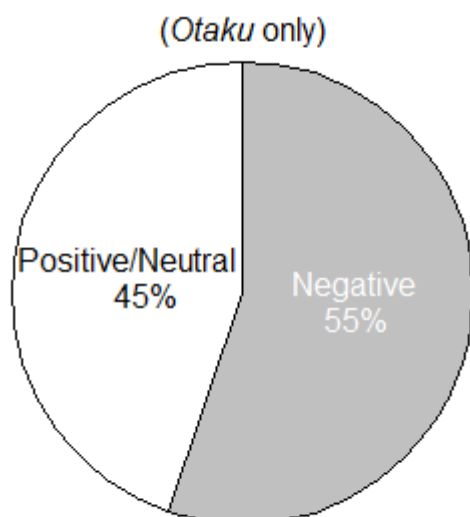
周りの状態を把握したり、人に物事を伝えたりするのが苦手である人
People that are poor at grasping the state of their surroundings and conveying things to [other] people, among other things

6.4 Otaku's position in Japanese society

Before diving into the various different answers given by the respondents in detail, the data given can be summarized in two categories: How *otaku* are regarded in Japanese society, and whether the image of *otaku* held by Japanese society had changed or not.

In what manner are "otaku" regarded in Japanese society?		
	Positive/Neutral	Negative
Otaku	13	16
Non-Otaku	1	3
Total	14	19

Common keywords reg. "otaku" in Japanese society
気持ち悪い・キモい (disgusting; sickening)
Good for the economy
Anime, manga, games etc
二次元 (two-dimensional matters)
Fashionable/"light" otaku are increasing
Poor outward appearance (fat, sweaty etc)
犯罪者の予備軍 (potential criminals)
ロリコン (lolicon)
サブカルチャー (sub-culture)



In the first category, each respondent's answer to the second question was determined to be either positive/neutral or negative, based on how they described how *otaku* (in their opinion) are regarded in Japanese society. The second category was much more straightforward to assess; either the respondents felt that the image of *otaku* has changed, or that it has not changed considerably, if at all.

Just by looking at the numbers, *otaku* who consider themselves to be regarded in a negative manner are in majority. A couple of notable explanations for their stances follows:

面倒くさい人たちだと思われていると思う

I think they're considered to be bothersome people

暗い部屋でパソコンの前でカチャカチャやっている、メガネを掛けて髪はボサボサの20代デブ男だと思われていると思っています

I think they are considered to be fat men in their 20ies, clattering away in front of a computer in a dark room, with unkempt hair and wearing glasses

[...]オタクは必ずアニメを見ているだとか、オタクはシャワーを浴びずにいつも不清潔にしているだとか、オタクは二次元の女の子にしか興味無いだとか、オタクは必ずメイドカフェに行くだとか、オタクはみんなロリコンで犯罪者予備軍であるだとかの強い決めつけをしている人が大半である

[...]People having the strong fixed idea that otaku are certainly watching anime, don't shower and are always unclean, are not interested in anything else but two-dimensional girls, are certainly going to maid cafés, are all lolicon and potential criminals, etc are in majority

On the other hand, those who think *otaku* are regarded in a positive or at least neutral manner had this and more to say:

ゲームや漫画などのサブカルチャーに強い関心を寄せている人間

A person with a strong interest for games, manga and other subcultures

一般では「オタク」＝「アニメ・ゲーム好きの暇人」って思われるように思います

I think that in general, "otaku" are thought to be "anime/game-enthusiastic people of leisure"

As for whether or not the image of *otaku* has changed over the recent years, a clear majority stated that it indeed has:

かなり変わったと思う。オタクの芸能人やアイドル(Gackt、西川貴教、中川翔子など・・)がテレビに登場し、初音ミクやEVANGELIONのコラボレーションが、色々な場所で行われているのを見ると、昔よりは一定の市民権は得たと思う

I think it has changed considerably. When I see otaku performers and idols (Gackt, Takanori Nishikawa, Shouko Nakagawa and the like) appearing on TV, and collaborations with Hatsune Miku⁵², Evangelion etc taking place in various places, I think that [otaku] have obtained definite civil rights

以前(20年以上前)に比べれば大分イメージが変わってきたと思う。近年、オタクはビジネスになるとマスコミが気付いてから周囲の目が変わってきているように感じる

If you compare with previous times (over 20 years ago), I think that this image has changed greatly. I feel that in recent years, after mass media realized otaku became a business, the surrounding viewpoints are changing

⁵² The most recent example of such collaborations being the Japanese branch of Domino's Pizza promoting their food using Hatsune Miku, a character and voice personification from the music synthesizer software *Vocaloid* and object of worship for many *otaku*, including smartphone applications and (now discontinued) pizza boxes designed with Hatsune Miku. <http://miku.dominos.jp/> (accessed 2013-05-16)

[...] ドラマの電車男をきっかけにイメージは年々良い方向に変化していると思います

[...] Starting with the drama Densha Otoko, I think the image is changing in a good direction for each year

気持ち悪いと思われがちだった気がするが、最近になってアニメは文化だと言われるようになり、イメージは変わってきていると思う

I get the feeling they tended to be regarded as disgusting, but recently anime is said to be culture, and I think [the otaku's] image is changing

The fewer cynics, on the other hand, offered their explanation to why this has not been the case:

根本的に「バカにされている」というのは変わらない

[The image of otaku] fundamentally "being made fun of" does not change

[...] 無条件にオタクは気持ち悪いと思う人が近年でも変わらず一般的に多い印象を受ける

[...] I get the impression that people who unconditionally think that otaku are disgusting have always been many with no change in recent years

Bitter arguments that may be well-funded, at least from the *otaku's* own point of view. Judging from the two most prominent themes that were revealed with the numerous answers to this question, namely *otaku* being regarded as disgusting (気持ち悪い, *kimochi warui*) but also as a profitable market, it is no wonder that the feeling of being ostracized by society lingers when you might be viewed as a necessary evil for economic stability.

7. Discussion

If one were to judge by Asahi's reports alone, it turns out that the view on *otaku* by the media (and by extension the general public) has been normalized considerably compared to how the word was brought into the public eye in the late 1980s.

Throughout the end of the 20th century, the discourse surrounding *otaku* were of a primarily negative tone following the Miyazaki incident. But as time went by, their importance in society, particularly for the market and economy in times of recession, was brought to light, and the discourse branched out to uplift the image of *otaku*, despite the occasional connection drawn to abhorrent crimes.

Earlier in this analysis, the word 熱心 (*nesshin*) was brought up as an example of a prominent word used by Asahi in regards to how they get into their respective hobbies compared to a regular person. But even more prominent is actually the first kanji forming the word, 熱 (*netsu*). By itself, its meaning revolves around *heat*, both literally and figuratively; *fever*, *temperature*, *passion*, *mania* and whatnot. Put together with certain other kanji, they convey different nuances of zeal and enthusiasm. In the dawn of *otaku* appearing in media, Asahi described *otaku* as being 熱狂 (*nekkyou*, *wildly enthusiastic*), perhaps implying that *otaku* were not emotionally stable (狂 alone meaning *crazy*; *insane*). As time went on the discourse changed, the phrasing itself in Asahi changing to 熱心, 熱中 (*necchuu*) etc, conveying nuances of *zeal* and *enthusiasm* similar to each other (and perhaps considerably lighter nuances when compared with 熱狂).

In the early 2000s, new words synonymous with *otaku* started to appear in Asahi; アキバ系 (*akiba-kei*) standing out as having been born out of the transition Akihabara made from a city of electronics to an *otaku* Mecca during the years preceding and following the millennium shift. Supposedly, it's around here that certain genres abundant in the Akihabara markets (namely *anime*, *manga*, *doujinshi* and video games) started to be regarded as specific *otaku* hobbies in the eyes of the general public, as Asahi (and other media, no doubt) from here on frequently adds the label "the holy ground for *otaku*" (オタクの聖地) whenever an article or news report mentions Akihabara.

Otaku culture, combined with online culture, also brought new words to contemporary Japanese language, as Asahi reported. The specific example would be 萌え, which was mentioned earlier in the analysis. Having combined the images contained in two homophonetic words (萌える, *budding* and 燃える, *getting fired up* respectively), the new word served to describe the kind of zeal *otaku* felt over certain matters (specifically idols and female *anime* characters), with their burning passion (燃え) over the young, cute and loveable (萌え).⁵³

With what's considered to be *otaku* interests spreading and taking root geographically (e.g. Akihabara) especially after the turn of the millennium, one could argue that *otaku* became less abnormal (in lieu of “more normal”) in the media, and gradually accepted as a natural part of the Japanese society. The results of Kikuchi's study mentioned earlier in this thesis⁵⁴ are consistent with the findings in this study, arriving at the same conclusion. While they're certainly outside the Japanese norm of an ordinary citizen, words and thoughts associated with the term *otaku* today more often describe an eccentric hobbyist rather than a lecherous reality-confused miscreant. Perhaps this is why the Akihabara massacre did not seem to have the same repercussions as earlier *otaku*-related crimes did, judging by Asahi of course.

This assertion, that the impression of *otaku* in media and public eye has changed for the better, is consistent with the results from the survey. Albeit the slight majority of *otaku* still think that *otaku* is viewed negatively by society as a whole (looking at hard numbers alone), most agree that their image has improved compared to earlier times. A number of them attribute this to the importance of *otaku* for the economy, with their super-consumerist tendencies in their fields of interest.

That said, the improved impression of *otaku* in media might in the end be mostly superficial. Same could be said for the word's actual meaning. While it started out as defining someone with a zealous disposition towards their selected hobby (or hobbies), as a result of “light-ification” (ライト化, *raito-ka*) if you may, it can now be applied to people who merely participate in a certain genre of Japanese multimedia without the same amount of enthusiasm

⁵³ Asahi Shimbun, 24 September 2001

⁵⁴ Kikuchi (2008).

or knowledge in the field as “real” *otaku*. The most prominent examples of such genres being *anime*, *manga* and video games, as it has been gathered by this research. One of the respondents in the survey even refers to this when asked if he considered himself to be an *otaku*:

半分はい。半分いいえ。私は漫画やアニメ、コスプレ、萌え系に興味を持っているから。しかし、どれも知識が浅いので、本当の「オタク」の知識量には勝てないと思うから半分いいえ

Partly yes. Partly no. Because I'm interested in anime, cosplay, moe-style and the like. However, since I think my knowledge in either is shallow and can't measure up to a real "otaku"'s amount of knowledge [I say] partly no

As for the words describing *otaku* in terms of outward appearance and sociability, the discourse conveyed in media has both remained the same and changed throughout the past decades, based on both the research in Asahi and on the survey. 気持ち悪い, and its more colloquial counterpart キモい (*kimoi*) are ever-present negative adjectives in many Asahi articles, and the notion of *otaku* being “abnormal” (異常), while considerably less frequent in later years, still exists in the mindset of mainstream society.

The “abnormal” viewpoint highlights the association between *otaku* and the fascination for two-dimensional matters (二次元, *nijigen*), which in turn has brought forth the phrase 二次コン into *otaku*-related discourse (*nijikon*, *two-dimensional complex*; basically being more interested in two-dimensional girls such as *anime* characters rather than real people).

Furthermore, as indicated by the survey results, while most *otaku* agree that the image of them held by society and the media has changed for the better during the many years that have passed, some argued that the change has not necessarily been from “bad” to “good”, but rather from “dangerous” to “pitiable”, thus still carrying negative connotations.⁵⁵ Especially with their stereotypical image; デブ (*fat*), 暗い (*gloomy*), 引きこもっている (*staying indoors*) and so on; persisting, particularly for the male *otaku*.

On the other hand, *otaku* can be more socially competent than they are given credit for,

⁵⁵ Numerous examples of *otaku* being portrayed as sad individuals can be found in the following link, which has collected photos and screenshots of *otaku* appearing in public, TV-reports and the like in less glamorous situations: <http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2125118904687001086> (accessed 2013-05-16)

granted you get to know them beyond the stereotypes. Social events catering almost specifically to *otaku* have increased in frequency over the years. In these events, *otaku* come out of their shells and take part in activities “normal” people their age do, such as dancing and socializing; albeit to music from *anime* and the like rather than what one would find at a regular club.

This could be attributed to the dilution of the proportion of male *otaku*, with the increasing number of female members in the *otaku* ranks, with many being just as enthusiastic as their male counterparts. These female *otaku* are however more prominent in the *anime*-genre of *otaku*, especially in enthusiasm about specific *anime* shows and characters, not to mention their penchant for bringing them to “life” through *cosplay*. To quote another respondent on why she thought herself to be an *otaku*:

この年になっても二次元というなのものが好きで、今はそのキャラクターになりたいと思って
コスプレもしているから

*Because even in this year I like two-dimensional things, and I wanted to become such a character so now
I also cosplay*

A connection can be drawn between the increase of female *otaku* and the earlier-mentioned “light-ification” of *otaku* culture, as more “fashionable” (お洒落, *oshare*) *otaku* have emerged over time, according to some of the questionnaire’s respondents. That is not to say that female *otaku* don’t share the enthusiasm of their male counterparts in given hobbies, but rather that their sense for aesthetics⁵⁶ compared to male *otaku* helped to improve the superficial image of *otaku* overall and made the term more approachable for “regular” fans of certain genres.

⁵⁶ This could be attributed to gender roles and stereotypes of course, which even among *otaku* is a subject much more fitting for its own study.

8. Conclusion

Reviewing the 24 years covered by the scope of this study, the image of *otaku* conveyed in the media has indeed changed for the better, though perhaps not in a groundbreaking sense. *Otaku* are still defined as particularly zealous in their hobbies, and said zeal is often uplifted in a ridiculing light in the media. While they are not necessarily feared as potential dangerous criminals anymore (as was the case around the time of the Miyazaki incident), they are not particularly well-regarded by society at large either, despite their role in keeping the economy going.

As for how *otaku* are defined, both in media and other sources, the given definitions are as varied as the sources themselves. There is however one particular core definition commonly used by all sources (media, dictionaries, popular opinion and even *otaku* themselves) to define *otaku*: insular or unsociable people who immerse themselves in specific fields of interest. Whether this is perceived as a positive or a negative characteristic appears to be mainly a generational matter; while the elderly might view *otaku* as juvenile and irresponsible members of society, the younger generation who share some interests with *otaku* may have a less antagonistic perception of them. And although genres such as *anime* and video games are commonly associated with *otaku*, other hobbies such as railroad enthusiasm and even sports are not uncommon hobbies for certain *otaku*.

Furthermore, the earlier-mentioned “light-ification” of *otaku*, with young and fashionable people sharing to a smaller degree some *otaku* hobbies but not their defining stereotypes applied by Japanese media and society turning up in increasing numbers, serve to dilute the extremes associated with the word. Not to mention how certain matters and phenomenon usually thought to be *otaku*-specific slip out in the “regular” world, such as the various collaborations between companies using *otaku* icons for public advertising.

With social events catering to *otaku* and inviting them to come out of their shells, and the increase of female members challenging the male dominance of *otaku*, the image and definition held by *otaku* themselves has changed as well and will probably continue to do so. Ultimately, one last question remains: Is it “okay” to be an *otaku* in Japan? Maybe not quite yet, but they are certainly getting there.

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